GEERDES '85
In memory of
A.B. FROST
and Brer Rabbit.

COMIX WAVE 48. March, 1987.
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This issue dedicated to Brer Rabbit
and all the anonymous Black story tellers
who kept his legend alive.

BRER RABBIT REVISITED

Brer Rabbit symbolized the revolutionary black slave, an angry trickster who always outwitted his white owner (Brer Fox or Brer Wolf) and often killed him. Now that's not the way you remember Brer Rabbit, because you probably saw him cleaned up for the silver screen by Walt Disney and his animators for SONG OF THE SOUTH (1946). Well, fact is, ol' Brer Rabbit was smuggled into this country by African slaves, but we learned about him from a journalist named Joel Chandler Harris. Story goes that Harris read an article in 1876 which was about Negro folk tales told in dialect. This reminded him of the stories he used to hear on the plantation when he was a kid and he sat down and wrote up some of the stories he remembered, publishing them one at a time in his paper, the Atlanta CONSTITUTION. A publisher saw the stories and suggested a book and that book was UNCLE REMUS, HIS SONGS AND SAYINGS (1880). Uncle Remus was an invention of Harris, a kindly old white-haired black man who told stories about Brer Rabbit and Brer Terrapin to a little white boy while they sat before the fireplace in his cabin. Problem with Remus was he was Harris in blackface, a man untroubled by the fact that he was a slave; this image caused Uncle Remus to rise to stardom in the Reconstruction South of the 1880s, and it caused him to fall from grace in the stormy era of the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s along with Uncle Tom and the rest of the white-written emasculated blacks.

Probably the best known story about Brer Rabbit is the first one in Harris' first book (there were ultimately 10, with a few coming after Harris' death in 1908.). In this story Brer Fox tries to snare Brer Rabbit by making a tar baby and leaving it in the good Rabbit's path. Being a friendly sort, Brer Rabbit speaks to the tar baby and when he receives no reply, he figures this little character is stuck up and needs to learn some manners. Turns out Brer Rabbit lays one on the tar baby and gets himself stuck. The more he tries to knock the sticky little wise guy around, the stucker he becomes until he is almost a part of the tar baby. Now this makes Brer Fox laugh, because he's got the little bugger now. He comes out and says he's now going to kill Brer Rabbit and have him for dinner. Okay, says the Rabbit, but don't throw me in that briar patch. Of course, after some dickering, the Fox does throw him in the briar patch. This gives Brer Rabbit the last laugh, because he was born in that briar patch and is now safe. A simple bit of folklore, but subtle, and influential (Toni Morrison wrote a novel out of the event, TAR BABY). What appears a simple folk tale tells a lot about the African's attitude toward his white captor. He must create his own image and be wary of getting stuck with an image created for him by the slave owner.

Joel Chandler Harris was a reluctant folklorist. He didn't really set out to collect folk tales; he just found himself involved and couldn't seem to quit. People sent him outlines of tales and researchers wrote to him and he had bills to pay and publishers wanted a follow up book, so he found himself turned into Uncle Remus. All of his life, he continued to make efforts to get away from the character, but his other books sold poorly. However much Harris shared the viewpoint of the white bourgeosie of his time, one must give him credit for being a careful and methodical collector of folktales. He would not print one of them unless he heard it orally and he was always careful to get the dialect down, because it was his purpose to record the tale exactly as it was being re-told by the Negroes of his time. To his discredit, I did not find any evidence that he ever shared any of his royalties with the black people who told him the tales, though I have read correspondence published in the biography written by his daughter-in-law that shows he did pay various white people who sent him outlines. After the surge of Afro-Americanism in the sixties, which had its major impetus in Northern and West Coast university communities, Uncle Remus fell into disfavor and along with him, his creator, Joel Chandler Harris. Not only the image of Remus, but his dialect, too, was rejected. When William J. Faulkner published his memoirs in 1977 as THE DAYS WHEN THE ANIMALS TALKED, he excluded dialect, arguing that he wanted clarity in the writing for the children who might read the stories. Faulkner heard the versions of the Brer Rabbit stories he published from Simon Brown and in DAYS he projects Simon as a heroic slave who fought against his enslavement and swore he would never rest until he was free. Brown was the antithesis of Uncle Remus. No Puritan like Harris, Brown reaffirmed the sexual nature of Brer Rabbit in his stories. We always knew, of course, that Brer Rabbit had more than "Ol' Molly Har" to wife. Being a hare, like Bugs Bunny and all of his subsequent imitators, he would have been quite profligate and seldom monogamous. Most of the stories about him focus on his everyday economic behavior. They tell the way Brer Rabbit got others to build homes which he then lived in, how he tricked Brer Fox or Brer Bear out of their food, and, often, how he just played jokes on people for the sheer fun of it. All of these stories come from one or another African village, including the best known like the race between him and Brer Terrapin (tortoise or turtle). Aesop, who always gets the credit for that one was reputed to be an Ethiopian slave, hence when we are talking about funny animals of any kind, we are usually talking about creatures of African origin. One problem I had with Faulkner's tales was his introduction of Brer Tiger and Brer Gilyard (a dragon), because tigers are indigenous to India, not Africa, and dragons are of Chinese, not African origin; there are no tigers or dragons in any of the tales collected by Harris.

It isn't easy to research Harris on the West Coast. Some biographies of him have been published by Southern universities, but they are not available here. Harris's books are not widely available either, perhaps due to local censorship by librarians, perhaps stolen since all the early editions sell at high collector's prices.

-CLAY GEERDES, 9/5/86

LAND SAKES! I'VE GIVEN BIRTH 48 TIMES AND THAT'S BEANS COMPARED TO YOUR ACHIEVMENT!
MY DEAR, YOU'VE PUSHED YOURSELF TO THE OUTER EXTREMES OF MOTHERHOOD!
IT'S AMAZING...
JUST THINK, A MOTHERS' DAY CARD THE SIZE OF A BILLBOARD!
D.Miller

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN COMIX WAVE?

Since most of what we are seeing in comics today is an outgrowth of children's literature, I decided to research and make available information and material relative to the subject. No easy task, I have found, since most of the children's books around are contemporary, particularly those in the libraries. That shouldn't surprise you, since these books, like their comic book contemporaries, are collected. This means that some libraries did have the books, but they have been stolen or placed in special collections where the public has only limited access to them. I'm systematic in my studies, off and on, which means I really write about what happens to interest me at the moment and put other things aside for some future time. To you that means I am chronological most of the time, but not all of it. If you keep your newsletters in a folder, you will eventually have a nice reference file should you ever get into the subject yourselves. Needless to say, I can only touch on the high points in my limited space, but these will serve as a jumping off place for you.

I don't like the term "children's literature" anymore than I like many of the terms we are stuck with. These days it is really a misnomer since the majority of children do not read; they watch TV. Their knowledge of any of what we have come to think of as classical children's literature comes from TV (usually animated versions done by Disney, Spielberg, et al.). Likely, this is true even of some of you who are over 30. It would probably surprise you to learn that those seven dwarves had neither individual personalities nor names in Grimm's SCHNEEWITCHEN, that there was no Thumper or Flower in Felix Salten's 1926 novel, BAMBI, nor any whale in Collodi's PINOCCHIO. This doesn't mean you're an illiterate clod unworthy to live with thinking people, it merely means you have grown up in an electronically-oriented environment where reading becomes secondary to watching. Today's 15-year-old has grown up with STAR WARS and Japanese robots that turn into machines of war, not with Crusader Rabbit and Howdy Doody. This is a given; neither good nor bad. It is my feeling, however, that these folks HAVE missed out on a lot.

So I don't like the term children's literature because much of what is out there on the shelves under that title is not literature at all, merely TV print-out, not even poorly disguised advertising for cuddly little monsters. That which is literate is not for children at all, but for people like me who enjoy reading and thinking about it. Oh, I know, classics like ALICE IN WONDERLAND and PETER PAN and even something as obtuse and dated as Kingsley's WATER BABIES still sell, but I would be willing to bet they sit unread on the bookshelves of little TV watchers and video game addicts. I've talked to too many children about this. I ask them about ALICE and sure, they know about her, but when I mention some of the characters I get this blank look and an admission of well, Mom got me that and I was always going to read it but.. Well, that's okay. I never could read ALICE when I was a boy, but as an adult I find it one of the most interesting books anyone may read about Victorian culture. There is even a theory around that the two ALICE books are really Queen Victoria's diaries in disguise. You see, kids are into immediate story, while adults are often interested in what is behind the story. There is Peter Pan, a flying boy who is half-human and half-fairy, but there are also George and Peter Llewelyn Davies, two of the boys upon whom Peter Pan was based. What happened to them? I'm going to tell you later this year in my Peter Pan issue. There is Peter Rabbit who came to life in a letter to a boy named Noel Moore in 1893 and was destined to become one of the most famous rabbits in children's fiction; well, there is also Thornton Waldo Burgess's Peter Rabbit who came to life in a newspaper story in 1910. Did Burgress swipe Peter from Beatrix Potter? I'll be telling that story in my issues on Potter and Burgess.

L. Frank Baum was the major influence on SUPERMAN and STAR WARS and Garis and Burgess were two of the major influences on funny animal comics as they developed in America. Okay, you can get on to the plugs now. ---CLAY GEERDES

COMIX PLUGOLA

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